

Matthew 3:1-12: *John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness, baptising those who repent, speaking out against the corrupt religious leaders, and challenging people to prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah.* In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist calls the Pharisees and Sadducees - the religious leaders of his day - a “Brood of Vipers!” Words matter. In a culture where honour is based on bloodline and descent, John’s words sting. These religious leaders, priding themselves as descendants of Abraham, are likened to descendants of poisonous snakes. John, as a Jew, is distancing these particular leaders from their Jewish heritage as children of Abraham. It is worth saying directly that Matthew’s John is not describing all Jewish people with this critique. He speaks directly to a particular group of leaders that is threatening the spiritual exercise of baptism and repentance in which John and his fellow Jews are engaged. John’s critique is not about bloodline. In fact, quite the opposite, John’s point is that bloodline is not enough. He, as a Jew, is calling to account the Pharisees and Sadducees as leaders who have let their people down. What matters most is not the soil a person comes from, but the fruit that person bears. And the fruit that these leaders are bearing for the Jewish people is venomous. John calls them out. (*Amy Allen, politicaltheology.com*)

COCU2A READINGS

This second week in Advent draws us into the possibilities of real peace for us and our world -God’s Shalom realm, and the promise of the Messiah, and the peace and justice he will bring. What would it mean if we really began to embrace the peace, the mutuality, the community and the enemy-love of the Gospel?

The lectionary invites us to see the way God’s Reign will take root among us, bringing in a world in which the weak and vulnerable are cared for, in which justice prevails and in which all people live in harmony in spite of (or maybe even because of) their differences. Perhaps the word that best sums up the Messianic dream of this week, and which John proclaimed, is the word “shalom” – well-being, peace, salvation, harmony, goodness, justice are all implied in this word. Isaiah proclaims it in the image of predators living in harmony with their prey. The Psalmist uses the word ‘shalom’ in describing the peaceful, refreshed world for which he prays. Paul pictures Jew and Gentile as one celebratory voice offered to God in worship, and John the Baptist, while speaking of judgement, which may seem to be the opposite of shalom, invites people to be ready for the coming of the Messiah who will immerse people in God’s Holy Spirit. God’s presence and power are available to all, irrespective of title, position or background – this is, perhaps the ultimate shalom!

It’s tempting to define the world in clear terms of what divides us and by difference, but when we do so, all we do is deepen the enmity between us, and keep us all from knowing and living God’s shalom. Ultimately justice is not something that can be achieved by alienation and by taking sides. While there are real evils in the world that must be resisted, it is wise to remember Paul’s words that it’s not the people we fight so much as the “principalities and powers”, and as we embrace a shalom way of being – which includes loving even those we consider to be our enemies – we reflect the light of God’s grace and love, and we begin to bring God’s shalom into our world as a lived reality. In what ways can you opt out of the polarising habits of your society and embrace a shalom-bringing inclusiveness that welcomes all and that seeks and celebrates common ground wherever it may be found?

May our worship lead us into God’s Shalom and transforms us into agents of Shalom in every moment, every situation and every interaction.

(John van de Laar, sacredise.com)

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19: *A prayer for the King to rule wisely and justly, protecting the weak and vulnerable and refreshing the world and the godly who live in it.*

Give the king your justice, O God,

and your righteousness to a king's son.

May he judge your people with righteousness,

and your poor with justice.

May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
and the hills, in righteousness.

**May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.**

May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon,
throughout all generations.

**May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
like showers that water the earth.**

In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound,
until the moon is no more.

**Blessed be the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.**

Blessed be God's glorious name forever;

may God's glory fill the whole earth. **Amen and Amen.**

I wonder what the people of Old Testament times who heard this psalm or sang it in worship thought that it meant. Were they singing of a real physical king? The psalm speaks of a reign that never ends, 'until the moon is no more'. Is this just hyperbole? Or is it about an eternal king, pointing forward to a Messiah to come? *(Rev Dr Janet Foggie)*

Isaiah 11:1-10: *Isaiah proclaims the coming of the "shoot from the stump of Jesse" who, through God's Spirit resting on him, will bring peace, justice, equity and righteousness to the earth. It is a metaphorical picture of peace to come - the wolf lying down with the lamb and the leopard with the kid. This poetry turns around the normal predator-prey relationships seen by the peoples in their everyday lives. It is a picture of heaven or a life hereafter, when all the normal conflict of life will have been resolved or suspended.*

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by

what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Romans 15:4-13: *Paul's prayer that God may empower the Church to live in harmony, since Christ came for both Jew and Gentile, and together they form one voice of praise to God.*

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul refers to the book of Isaiah and the prophecies relating to the 'root of Jesse'. Is this sort of 'post hoc' re-reading of the Hebrew scriptures justified? How would it be if another faith did the same to our stories of Jesus? If it is, what do we learn from Paul making this comparison? If it is not helpful, how do we understand the Old Testament references in the New? *(Rev Dr Janet Foggie)*